

Filed for intro on 02/01/95  
House Bill \_\_\_\_\_  
By \_\_\_\_\_

Senate Bill No.SJR0037  
By Wilder

A RESOLUTION to honor the memory of Senator Avon N.  
Williams, Jr.

WHEREAS, Senator Avon N. Williams, Jr. of Nashville passed from this life to a far better existence on August 29, 1994; and

WHEREAS, the architect of Metro Nashville schools desegregation, an ardent voice of civil rights and a longtime member of the General Assembly, Senator Williams lived ahead of his time, pushing for racial equality when the movement was in its infancy; and

WHEREAS, from the time he first began his practice of law in Knoxville in 1949, Senator Williams accepted cases of abuse and discrimination, cases other attorneys refused; and

WHEREAS, characterized by Governor Ned McWherter as “a man of courage, conviction and conscience”, Senator Williams “used the law as a tool to open doors of opportunity for those whose opportunities were limited. His legacy is a state where all citizens have the ability to achieve their full potential”; and

WHEREAS, renowned for his fearless personality and determination, Senator Williams moved to Nashville in 1953, and entered legal practice with the late Z. Alexander Looby; and

WHEREAS, Senator Williams was a tireless advocate of civil rights in all areas of human endeavor, but especially in the fight to desegregate public schools; and

WHEREAS, Senator Williams' best known and longest lasting legal battle was with the Nashville schools' desegregation case; the case resulted in a massive cross-town busing plan to desegregate public schools; and

WHEREAS, always a defender of those whose civil rights had been trampled, Senator Williams participated in dozens of teacher discharge cases, suits against discrimination on golf courses and in motels and restaurants, including sit-ins in Nashville and Lebanon in 1960-62; he also took on cases involving employment, housing and jury discrimination and policy brutality; and

WHEREAS, he also led the plaintiffs' case in the historic court battle that ended with the U.S. District Court ordering the merger of UT-Nashville with Tennessee State University; and

WHEREAS, Vice President, Al Gore, said of Senator Williams: "Avon's voice was strongest in his role at the forefront of the civil rights movement as he worked to ensure public opportunities and justice for all Tennesseans. But throughout his life, which included some of the most tumultuous periods of our country's history, he was a steadfast leader of his community"; and

WHEREAS, Senator Williams again demonstrated his stalwart commitment to this community in 1968 when he ran for and was subsequently elected to the State Senate where he distinguished himself as an educational and human rights expert; and

WHEREAS, having previously founded the Davidson County Independent Political Council and the Tennessee Voters Council, Avon Williams assumed his seat in the State Senate with the same intensive drive that motivated him on legal cases; and

WHEREAS, for some fourteen years, he served as Chairman of the Senate State and Local Government Committee, the first African-American to chair a State Senate Committee; and

WHEREAS, throughout his sagacious stewardship of the Senate State and Local Government Committee, Senator Williams remained true to his civil rights background, ensuring

that all bills before the committee received a fair hearing while standing steadfastly by his personal convictions; and

WHEREAS, he was instrumental in passing bills requiring schools to include African-American studies, establishing the Tennessee Housing Development Agency, and appropriating 1.5 million dollars to Meharry Medical School for the study of sickle cell anemia and 9 million dollars for Tennessee State University; and

WHEREAS, during his illustrious tenure in the Senate, he pushed for mandatory kindergarten and fought to ensure that TSU remained a dominant public college; today, TSU's downtown campus bears his name; and

WHEREAS, from the time he took office, Senator Williams worked assiduously for the passage of the State Civil Rights Law of 1977 which prohibited discrimination in employment and public places based on race, religion, sex or national origin; and

WHEREAS, described as "our history" by his successor to Senate District 19, Senator Thelma Harper, Avon Williams served in the Tennessee Senate for more than two decades but never lost his focus of helping the people who put him in office; and

WHEREAS, Senator Williams always kept a hectic schedule during his thirty years as a civil rights activist and attorney he still found time to serve his people and community in other ways; and

WHEREAS, although he is no longer with us physically, Senator Williams' towering moral presence will still be felt in this body when matters concerning civil rights and human freedom are debated and voted upon; perhaps more than any other single Tennessean, his life exemplifies the precepts of liberty, justice and equality; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE NINETY-NINTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING, That we hereby pause in our deliberations to honor the august memory of Senator Avon N. Williams, Jr., an exemplary citizen and legislator whose sense of duty and fairness in the battle for civil rights altered the course of history. We recall fondly his indomitable spirit, his heartfelt

commitment to the disenfranchised; and his excellence as an attorney, legislator and human being.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That we express our condolences to Senator Williams' family and many friends and supporters.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.

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